

Handling Anthrax and Biological Agent Threats

Since the recent occurrence of anthrax in Florida, Washington DC and New York City, there has been substantial public concern and publicity about potential bioterrorism. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has developed guidelines that are meant to help you in dealing with patients who are concerned about anthrax exposures or who may have suggestive symptoms.

The Tennessee Department of Health and the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) are **not** recommending serologic testing or nasal cultures for persons who present solely with flu-like illness or are simply "worried" about the possibility of becoming exposed to anthrax. These tests are only being used in epidemiological investigations where anthrax exposure has been confirmed.

Anthrax testing may be arranged at the Tennessee Department of Health State Laboratory for a hospitalized patient who shows radiographic evidence of a widened mediastinum or a clinical presentation suggestive of anthrax. In such situations, the Memphis and Shelby County Health Department should be notified immediately, (901-544-7717). In addition, the State Laboratory is working with law enforcement agencies to test suspicious letters and packages for possible bioterrorism agents.

Individuals at home should **call 911** when a threat letter or package incident occurs. While at work, contact your supervisor and **call 911**. When this call is placed, the appropriate agencies such as: The Memphis and Shelby County Emergency Management Agency, Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, local law enforcement, FBI and health department officials will be notified. In general, chemoprophylaxis of contacts may be delayed until the culture test results provide evidence for the presence or absence of *Bacillus anthracis*.

It is important that medical providers maintain a high index of suspicion for diseases that could indicate bioterrorism, such as anthrax, smallpox, tularemia, or Q fever.

Please contact the health department at 901-544-7717 for questions or to report incidents. Individuals outside of Shelby County should contact their local health department. For additional information, during business hours you may contact the Communicable and Environmental Disease Services Section at (615) 741-7247 or for after-hours emergencies (615) 532-8515.